

The Renewal of the French Amphibious Doctrine

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THE RENEWAL OF THE FRENCH AMPHIBIOUS DOCTRINE

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On Sunday December 29, 2002, The *Foudre* LPD landed troops and armored vehicles in Abidjan, Ivory-Coast, thus enabling France to quickly reinforce the biggest intervention on the African continent since the 1980s. Operation Licorne is the most recent example of force projection from the sea by the French armed forces. As a consequence of the number of emerging threats associated with littorals¹, the capability for long-range engagement and the ability to intervene far from the national territory has become one of the most obvious challenges introduced by the new post-cold war strategic environment. Amphibious warfare, which was relegated to a secondary order during the Cold War, has become a primary concern for the French defense policymakers and led to the implementation of a national doctrine for amphibious operations. How will this doctrine drive organization, equipment and training of the forces involved in amphibious operations? Interoperability and cooperation between services and allied forces is critical to meet the challenges of modern amphibious warfare.

The disappearance of the soviet threat on the European continent is the catalyst for dramatic changes in the French amphibious doctrine. The vanishing threat of a high intensity conflict on European soil, along with conflicts such as the Gulf War in 1991, has paved the way for a more expeditionary strategy. The doctrinal renewal in amphibious warfare for the French armed forces occurred in 1997, with the implementation of a national concept for

¹ As identified by the United States Marine Corps (USMC) Operational Maneuver From the Sea (OMFTS),

amphibious operations². Although France possessed amphibious troops and ships for years, the sea has not really been used as a maneuver space. Accordingly, amphibious shipping was dedicated mostly to operational transport. However, the actual strategic framework of the post Cold-War era no longer makes this possible and suggests a more offensive use of amphibious assets.

In this respect, the new doctrine provides the basis for the organization of forces and defines seven essentials requirements for the conduct of amphibious operations³.

1. The operation must be conducted from the sea.

2. The joint landing force must embark and be transported safely to the amphibious objective area (AOA) within a range of 7000 km.

3. Situational awareness must be gained through intelligence collection in the AOA.

4. Naval and air superiority must be gained in the AOA.

5. Shaping actions must be conducted through special operations, countermine warfare, naval gunfires, and offensive air support.

6. The joint landing force must be brought ashore through the optimal use of landing crafts range and velocity.

7. The forces ashore must be sustained and supported by fires.

These requirements may seem obvious, but in the case of the French armed forces, the new doctrine involves three services. Since the French armed forces do not possess a separate organization, such as the United States Marine Corps (USMC), any amphibious operations

² The most common French acronyms related to amphibious operations are listed in Annex A.

³ National concept for amphibious operations, Ch II, § 4.

will require an increased interoperability and cooperation between services, essentially between the Navy, the Army, and Special Forces. Under such circumstances the objectives of an amphibious operation must be scaled to the capabilities of the forces. The French joint landing force, not exceeding 1400 men, is organized into three functional areas: namely a ground combined arms task force, an airmobile task force, and a logistic support group.

Realistically, amphibious operations in a national framework may be employed to conduct two types of missions: either quick evacuation missions not exceeding a duration of thirty-six hours or a range of 100 kilometers, or the seizure of an entry platform for follow-on forces. In the second case, the goal is to set a reinforced battalion ashore for ten days, to conduct autonomously operations against a company-sized enemy.

Since a national large-scale amphibious operation is unlikely, the new concept is established according to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) standards⁴ to form an amphibious brigade. This doctrinally common basis is intended to enable a smoother integration within a coalition, and in turn, provide either NATO or Europe with a credible projection force. The recent NATO amphibious, maritime, and power projection exercise *Destined Glory 2002* reflected the increasing concern for cooperation and integration. Moreover, for the first time, a French officer was in command of an amphibious brigade

⁴ NATO documents listed in bibliography.

within a NATO coalition, thus validating, at the international level the implementation of the national concept for amphibious operations.

The acquisition of new assets and organizational changes are critical to fulfilling the seven requirements defined by the new doctrine. In this respect, the scheduled procurement of new materials constitutes a major advance. In this respect, the renewal of amphibious shipping is the most important development. Currently, France has four LSD class amphibious ships at its disposal, two of which were updated to conduct modern amphibious operations. Two new landing helicopter dock (LPD) class ships are to be commissioned in 2005 and 2006. These ships were conceived through a joint program, in order to meet the command and control (C2), maneuver, logistics, and force protection requirements associated with the new amphibious doctrine. The C2 structure provides the commander of the amphibious task force (CATF) and commander of the landing force (CLF) cells with a dedicated space of 800 square meters. Moreover, the setup of information systems pertaining to each service and allied force is facilitated through pre-installed interface⁵.

The storage capacity and numbers of spots dedicated to helicopters has also increased. Along with the modernization of the helicopter fleet⁶, this enhanced capability takes into account two specifics requirements. First, this capability increases the ability to conduct, even at a smaller scale than envisioned by the USMC, ship to

⁵ The interoperability of information systems up to the brigade level is currently worked out through the Multinational Interoperability Program (MIP).

⁶ The "Tigre" attack helicopter and the NH90 medium helicopter are respectively to be commissioned no later than 200 and 2005. The "Puma" and "Cougar" medium helicopters will also undergo a service life extension program.

objective maneuver (STOM). Second, this capability allows one spot that is specifically dedicated to heavy helicopters, such as the CH 53 "Super Stallion" or the MV-22 Osprey, two assets that France does not possess. In addition, interoperability is emphasized with a welldeck scaled to fit two Landing Craft Air Cushions (LCAC). Within a coalition, this capacity responds to two shortfalls that cannot be solved immediately with national assets. First, the French armed forces do not currently possess an amphibious armored vehicle (AAV). The future wheeled infantry fighting vehicle to be procured by 2006 will not have the ability to be launched from the sea, either. However, as emphasized by the new doctrine, the French Landing Force must be able to be part of the first assault wave of a coalition force. In this regard, the emphasis must be put on the ability to conduct helicopterborne operations and to ensure interoperability with the assets currently in use within allied forces. Second, the landing crafts currently in use limit the ability to conduct operations from over the horizon (OTH). The use of the LCAC would provide an alternative in response to this shortfall.

This ability to launch and command operations from the sea also requires the ability to sustain such operations. The critical requirement to provide logistic support at sea must be taken into account. A dedicated space of 750 square meters to medical facilities enables the implementation of a real hospital on board the new amphibious shipping. Increased storage capacities, along with education and recreation facilities dedicated to the embarked troops,

are also among the most important improvements. Even with these improvements, a fully sea-based logistic system remains limited by the lack of proper assets. Currently the movement of logistics ashore is essentially realized through the use of light, amphibious, resupply cargo (LARC) and miscellaneous landing crafts. Reducing the logistical footprint ashore would imply the use of non-national assets, such as the heavy helicopters already mentioned. In spite of these limitations, the capacities of the French amphibious float will be increased significantly by 2006. These capacities will be integrated into a more cohesive ATF brought into reality with the procurement of a second aircraft carrier, the modernization of the anti-air warfare and mine countermeasures shipping effective no later than 2008.

Mastering amphibious know-how requires skills at every level of execution. Since there is no French standing organization comparable to a Marine Expeditionary unit (MEU), training is a particular challenge. Three brigades, namely the 9th Marine Light Armored Brigade (9th BLBma), the 6th Light Armored Brigade (6th BLB), two large units mainly composed of "Troupes de Marine"⁷ (TDM) and "Legion Etrangere"⁸ formations, and the 4th Army Light Aviation brigade have been specifically designated to train for amphibious operations. These units are recognized for their expeditionary mindset, their long operational experience, and their flexibility. These characteristics provide a good basis for training because the

⁷ French Marine Corps.

⁸ French Foreign Legion.

"deployment culture"⁹, gained during the past thirty years, facilitates the integration in a joint environment.

However, this "deployment culture" is not enough to cope with the lack of other specific training. For example, in a general perspective, Army units need to work closely with the Navy. A general knowledge of the Navy amphibious assets, as well as the basics of life "on board" should be, in fact, part of the initial education of the enlisted personnel in the amphibious involved units. This is already the case in some TDM units but should be generalized to all units of the assigned brigades.

Recently, an effort has been made at the national level to schedule large scale exercises enabling such units to focus on specific drills. For example, the annual "Catamaran"¹⁰ exercise, along with the operational evaluation of regiments in an amphibious framework, facilitates the acquisition of required know-how by troops and staffs, as well. While the operational tempo of the forces makes it difficult, joint exercises are crucial. In this respect, the reinforcement of French forces overseas, by embarked units could respond to strategic interests and also promote the acquisition of shared knowledge by providing services for a four-month period of operational training. This kind of deployment, comparable to a MEU Special Operations Capable (SOC) deployment, has already been realized and has proved its efficiency. Known under the name of

⁹ These old professional units constituted the core of the French Quick Reaction Force (FAR) before the phasing out of national service.

¹⁰ This exercise took place along the southern coast of France and was played for the first time in 1999 in order to validate the national concept for amphibious operations.

Operation *Corymbe*, a Company landing team has, for example, been deployed along the West-African coast in response to the Ivory Coast insurgency situation in 2000 and 2002. While the actual level of involvement of the French forces does not enable such a deployment in a systematic manner, it still remains a course of action to be exploited in the future.

At the international level, exchanges and joint exercises with units such as the USMC or the British Royal Marine Commando also seem to be a good mean of improving existing skills. The exchange of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), with highly skilled units, could effectively increase the operational value of units as well as their interoperability. In this respect, the presence of the United States Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) in the Mediterranean and its punctual port visit to the French naval base in Toulon, provides an opportunity for joint training. This kind of combined training can also be realized in the United States. A company of the French Third Marine Infantry Battalion (3rd RIMa), for example, is scheduled to conduct a joint exercise in Camp Lejeune in May 2003.

The education of leaders is also critical to promoting the exchange of knowledge between allies. In this regard, the USMC Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) is the only professional military education course chosen, among others, to be attended by a French captain during the academic year 2002-2003. This will also be the case during the academic year 2003-2004. This single fact demonstrates that the French forces are serious about promoting a

joint professional military education to junior leaders involved in modern amphibious warfare.

The implementation of the new national amphibious doctrine represents a true renewal in amphibious warfare for the French armed forces and paves the way for the completion of concrete objectives by 2006. The improvements already accomplished are quite significant but still need to be carried out on a long-term basis, especially regarding equipment and training. This doctrine is still evolving to meet all the challenges of modern amphibious warfare. In this regard, only increased cooperation and interoperability between allied forces will enable large-scale amphibious operations, such as those envisioned by NATO or Europe defense policymakers.

ANNEX A

MOST COMMON FRENCH ACRONYMS RELATED TO AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS

National concept for amphibious operations: Concept national des operations amphibies(CNOA).

Landing platform dock : Batiment de projection et de commandement (BPC).

Joint Landing Force : Groupement interarmees embarque (GIE).

Logistic support group : Groupement de soutien logistique (GSL).

Airmobile task force : Sous groupement aeromobile (SGAM).

Ground combined arms task force: Sous groupement tactique interarmes (SGTIA).

ANNEX B
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